DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 987 FL 015 849

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TITLE The Case Study Approach to Teaching Languages for Business: Problems and Benefits.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 12p.; In: Proceedings of the Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions (Dearborn, MI, May 2-4, May 2-4, 1985); see FL 015 835.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Administration Education; *Business Communication; *Case Studies; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Higher Education; Information Sources; *Languages for Special Purposes; Language Teachers; *Problem Solving; Second Language Instruction

ABSTRACT

Business case studies, descriptions of management problems or decisions that require students to analyze and decide on an appropriate course of action, are suitable for classroom study of commercial language because the technique emphasizes situational analysis and communicative activities such as role playing. The principles underlying the case study approach are the following: (1) situational analysis encourages students to focus on specific real situations; (2) the relationship between analysis and action is demonstrated; (3) a learner-centered classroom is fostered; amd (4) students can develop an administrative point of view and the ability to size up a situation, consider a variety of approaches to solving it, and decide on appropriate action. On the teacher's part, the case study approach requires skill in leading a case discussion, understanding of the basic theory and concepts in the case, and language proficiency. The teacher must also give up some control of the class to promote open-ended discussion. Elements that the teacher can control are direction of the discussion, introduction of neglected information or options, and requests for clarification and summary. An appendix lists sources for case study materials in Spanish, French, German, and English, including the Harvard Business School Case Directory. It is noted that the Harvard Business School has devoted several cases specifically to teacher training. (MSE)

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THE CASE STUDY APPROACH TO TEACHING LANGUAGES FOR BUSINESS: PROBLEMS AND BENEFITS

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THE CASE STUDY APPROACH TO TEACHING LANGUAGES FOR BUSINESS: PROBLEMS AND BENEFITS

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Introduction

The case study approach has received considerable attention recently as a effective way to teach languages for business. Piotrowski's article entitled "Business as Usual: Using the Case Method to Teach ESL to Executives" advocated the case study approach in the June, 1982 TESOL Quarterly. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the problems and benefits associated with the methodology, materials, and mastery of the case study approach in the language for business classroom.

Business schools around the world use the case study approach made famous by Harvard Business School for over seventy years. The first cases were written by Harvard professors who studied a business problem and wrote a description of the management situation in their report to the company that asked them to investigate the problem. The professors used the cases in their classes, thereby bringing actual business problems that they had been consulted to analyse and "solve" to their students. The same procedure is used frequently today to produce case studies. Although Harvard Business School remains the most renowned and prolific producer of case studies, professors of other prestigious business schools such as Stanford University and the University of Virginia have written a large body of

cases, often as a direct result of their own consulting experiences. Due to the problem-solving nature of the case study method, its use is not restricted to business schools. On the contrary, medical schools, public health institutions, schools of education and the government use the case study approach for training doctors, health officials, teachers, and government employees. In addition, a number of departments in colleges of arts and sciences employ the case study method. For business language courses, the case study approach is appropriate for a variety of reasons, including its emphasis on situational analysis and communicative activities such as role playing.

Essentially, a business case is a description of a management problem or decision that occurs at a given place and time. The students must analyse the situation and decide on an appropriate course of action. A typical case from the Harvard Business Case collection called "Steinway and Sons" can be summarized as follows: "This case considers whether Steinway should reintroduce a long-discontinued product line to meet competition from the Japanese. It raises the issue of just how quality is defined in this market. It looks closely at a production process relying on craft skills. Students have the opportunity to consider issues of quality." (Harvard Business School Case Collection: New Course Material 1982-83) As is evident from this example, the case study brings the realities of business practices into the classroom, and involves the student in meaningful, practice-oriented learning activities.

Method

The methods of teaching business cases can be summarized as a series of basic principles. It is interesting to note that all of the methods have been described in the language learning literature as effective for teaching second languages. The first principle of case instruction is situational analysis, that encourages the student to focus on a specific and very real situation. The realism of the case increases the interest and motivational levels of the student while the emphasis on analysis develops critical thinking and cognitive processes. Small class or whole group discussion is vital to case analysis as well as to the development of listening and speaking strategies. In the foreign language classroom, the situational analysis principle appears in role-playing, problem solving and simulation activities. Language acquisition theorists such as Krashen advocate the use of realistic, communicative and meaningful activities to promote second language acquisition. Case studies provide the students with the opportunity for active involvement in relevant communication.

The second fundamental principle of teaching case analysis is demonstrating the relationship between analysis and action. The student must apply her knowledge to the situation and recommend a course of action. In the second language class, this is often done in role-plays and problem solving activities.

The third major principle of teaching business cases is the fostering of a learner-centered classroom in which the students play the central role in the class. Of necessity, the teacher

relinquishes some of her traditional authority while turning over much of the responsibility for learning to the students. The students have to think about the case, discuss the situation, identify the problem, think of alternative solutions, choose a course of action and discuss future implications of such action. The teacher's role is that of a discussion or exploration guide, rather than the traditional authority figure who supplies the correct answers. In case study, many times more than one answer is correct or appropriate. The very lack of precise answers can be frustrating to teachers who prefer total control of their classroom, and to students who are not used to being in charge of their own learning. For over a decade much attention has been directed toward the learner-centered foreign language classroom, in the belief that a focus on the learner will enhance mastery of material, motivation, and responsibility for learning.

The final methodological principle is that one of the chief goals of the case study method is to produce an "administrative point of view" in the student. "Administrative point of view" refers to the ability to size up a situation, consider a variety of possible ways to approach a problem, and decide on appropriate action. Again, in the foreign language classroom, this principle has been cultivated in role-plays and simulations, and in the general development of flexibity and creativity in language use.

One of the primary challenges for the instructor using the case method is how to lead a case discussion in class. The case discussion process allows students to explore the complexity of the case situation to promote mutual learning. The instructor needs to ask the right question of a specific student at the

appropriate time to maximize learning for all

To effectively lead the case discussion, the instructor must have intellectual command of the basic theory and concepts covered in the case. As a language teacher, of course the professor must also be proficient in the language.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge for the case study teacher is the creation of the student-centered classroom necessary for the case study approach. The teacher must give up some control of the class, unable to use a planned lecture or an instructor centered question-answer session. Instead, the case study approach calls for a difficult to plan, free-flowing discussion that is driven by student ideas. The discussion is likely to take interesting but unpredictable turns. The teacher has to be flexible, and prepared for any eventuality in the discussion. The purpose of the class discussion, of course, is to explore the situation with its givens, possibilities, likely solutions and their consequences. Students and teachers alike may feel uncomfortable with the ambiguity and open-endedness of the case study method.

The open-endedness of the case discussion permits creative use of language and exchange of ideas. Ideally, students become so involved with the content of the class that they forget to be inhibited by the language. Fear of making errors is reduced, and the meaning of the language becomes the focal point for communication. The activities of the case study method are largely communicative, and always purposeful. Students are called upon to analyse a realistic situation and brainstorm

alternative courses of action. As they become more involved in the situation, the more realistic the case becomes and the more intense the discussion. Role-playing or simulation evolves naturally or is directed subtly by the teacher.

In spite of the free-flowing nature of the case study discussion, the teacher can consciously plan for a more successful class. One way to achieve a higher degree of class discussion is to promote student to student interaction, rather than teacher to student discussion. The instructor can also focus on directing the class discussion rather than dominating it. The teacher can ask questions which are derived from previous student comments or she can suggest alternative approaches to problems. She might also highlight neglected information and its possible consequences. Other techniques include the request for clarification of assumptions or for a summary of the discussion at any point in the class.

Preparing to teach the case study involves the thorough preparation of the case of the day. A written analysis of the case may help the teacher to gain a command of the case facts necessary to make a logical analysis of the situation. The professor can try to predict the course of the discussion and prepare for possible alternative responses by the students. The opening and closing of the course can be planned by considering whether to ask for volunteers or select lead students to start the opening discussion or to summarize at the end of class.

Materials

The lack of case study materials and related exercises can be a major problem for language for business teachers. However,

the Harvard Business School and several case clearinghouses in French, German and Spanish speaking countries offer thousands of business cases in a wide variety of topics in English, Spanish, French and German. The cases are not written specifically for foreign language classes, rather they are intended for use in business courses. However, the teacher can adapt the cases for language for business courses by emphasizing reading skills, vocabulary development, communication strategies and critical thinking. The teacher may want to develop exercises that are suited to the specific language needs of her students.

The handout lists the clearinghouses for cases in Spanish, French and German as well as sources of cases in English. The Harvard Business School is the principle distributor of case studies in English. Many of the Harvard cases which have been translated into French, Spanish and German are available through the clearinghouses. Other well-known business schools such as Stanford University and the University of Virginia distribute their own case studies.

Mastery

A third major challenge to teachers of case studies is the mastery of the business concepts and theory contained in the cases. Naturally some cases are more complex than others, and some teachers have had more business training than others. Teachers who are concerned about their business knowledge can take advantage of the teachers manuals that accompany many of the Harvard Business School cases. An instructor with less business background might want to choose only those cases with teacher's

manuals, or cases which deal with topics that are familiar or of special interest to the instructor. The Harvard Business School Case Directory has a topic index and annotations about specific cases that are very useful for selecting appropriate cases.

To help instructors who are not familiar with teaching business cases, Harvard Business School has devoted several cases specifically to teacher training. Among these cases are "Trevor Jones", which treats the problem of selecting a student to lead off a case discussion, and the use of role-playing, the "Case of the Disgruntled Student", and "HB 1" which describes a new instructor who runs into problems when he tries to use a non-traditional way of beginning a course.

In conclusion, the challenges of using the case study method in language for business classes are not insurmountable. The methods that are an integral part of the case study approach such as role-playing, critical thinking, situational analysis, learner-centered classroom, small and whole group discussion, exploration of alternatives and summaries are commonly used in the foreign language classroom. In addition, the advantage of teaching language through content is widely recognized, and is characteristic of the case study approach. Student involvement in realistic problem-solving activities promotes a high level of interest and motivation. Case studies in a variety of languages are readily available, although teachers may want to develop supplementary materials that focus on language skills. A wide range of case topics and the availability of teaching manuals will help the inexperienced teacher to use this approach.

Undoubtedly teachers and students of languages for business can benefit in many ways from the use of the case study approach

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Availability of Case Study Materials

1. Case Studies in English:

Harvard Business School Case Collection: Directory of Course Material Boston, MS: Harvard Business School, 198 . $125 1077 pgs., Index volume available for $25, 456 pgs.

Computerized printout of over 5,000 cases which are currently available in six subject categories. Course modules and videotapes are described following case listings.

Harvard Business School Case Collection. New Course Material 1982-1983 Boston, MA: HBS, 1983. $15 315 pgs.

Annotated listings of new cases, best-selling cases, course modules and videotapes plus indexes by author, title and topic.

Directory of Management Cases. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School, 1983. $10 155 pgs.

Listings of non-Harvard Business School cases and information on how to order the material.

The above works can be ordered from HBS Case Services, Morgan Hall, Harvard Business School, Boston, MA 02163

2. Clearinghouses for Case Studies in Spanish:

Cedo, Universidad EAFIT
Apartado Aereo 3300
Medellin, COLOMBIA

IESE
Avenida Pearson 21
Barcelona 34, SPAIN

3. Clearinghouses for Case Studies in French:

Centrale de Cas HEC
5255 Avenue Decelles
Montreal, H3T 1V6 CANADA

Centrale de Cas
47 Rue de Toqueville
75017 Paris, FRANCE

4. Clearinghouse for Case Studies in German

Zentrale fur Fallstudien
Schloss Gracht (USW)
D-5042, Erfstadt 1 (Liblar)
WEST GERMANY

5. How to teach the case method:

Christensen, C. Roland. Teaching by the Case Method. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Division of Research, 1981.